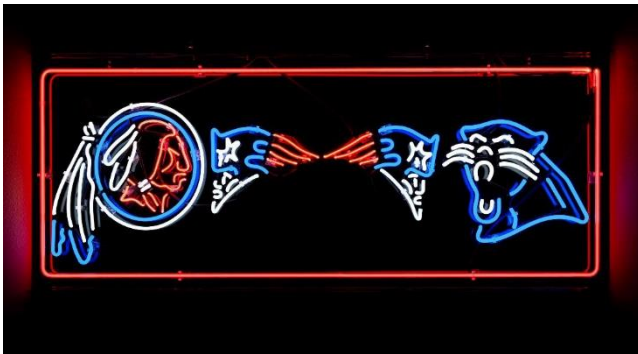


## **GARAGE**

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by Paul Laster

### **Colin Kaepernick's NFL Protest Inspired This New Exhibition**

"Sidelined" includes a collage of James Baldwin and Michelle Obama.



Artist Samuel Levi Jones makes his curatorial debut at New York's Galerie Lelong & Co. tomorrow with *Sidelined*, a show organized in response to San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick taking a knee in 2016 to protest racial injustice, and the ongoing repercussions of that outwardly simple gesture. GARAGE talked to the artist in his Chicago studio.

#### **GARAGE: What made you decide to organize an exhibition around NFL players' protests?**

**Samuel Levi Jones:** I'd been paying attention to Kaepernick and was interested in putting together a show in response to the ways in which some people twisted what his protest was about by claiming it was disrespecting the country or disrespecting the flag, when really it was about standing up against injustice.

#### **Are you a football fan?**

I played sports growing up, and I played university football.

#### **What does the title of the show—*Sidelined*—refer to?**

The idea of being sidelined! Kaepernick, in a way, was sidelined because of what he was doing. It's also about being sidetracked from having a cause or a positive initiative—the powers-that-be disrupting progress. And I wanted a title that related to the terminology of the game.

What were your criteria for selecting artists?

I didn't want work that just referenced sports; I wanted it to be about resistance.

#### **Were any of the artists also athletes in school?**



Samuel Levi Jones, No Fucking Liberty, 2017. © Samuel Levi Jones Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

Melvin Edwards actually played football for UCLA and—from what I understand—he turned down a chance to play professionally in order to pursue his art practice. I believe Lauren Halsey played basketball and Derek Fordjour played football.

**Were any of the works pre-existing?**

Some of them, but all of the artists made at least one new work for the show.

Melvin Edwards' welded-steel sculptures are visually abstract but politically engaging.

Yes, I liked that element. I was thinking of William C. Rhoden's book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, about how players are treated as commodities. Even though there are benefits to playing sports, when you have a situation like the one now, where players want to stand up against injustice and are being told not to, it's disempowering. I was also drawn

to Melvin's work by the fact that he played college football in a time of segregation. He has that personal experience and can speak to what's going on.

**I enjoy Deborah Roberts's piece *O' Say Can't You See?*—partly because of her collage technique and partly because it shows a girl taking the knee. What can you tell us about the work?**

It incorporates images of Michelle Obama's fists and James Baldwin's eye. I like the female element, too. Not only have football players been protesting, but cheerleaders have been taking the knee, as well. Everyone has a voice. There's strength in numbers.

**You've deconstructed actual footballs for your outwardly abstract works *No Fucking Liberty* and *Delay of Game*. Can you tell me any more about those works?**

When I played football at Taylor University—a small, predominately white college in Indiana—I felt as though my opportunities weren't equal to others.' It haunted me for a long time and I regretted not taking a stand.

After I broke down the footballs for these works I sewed them together and took them to the fields where I'd played, then rubbed grass into them for 60 minutes, the duration of a game. There was something therapeutic about that.

**One work that Patrick Martinez exhibited in his last show at Charlie James Gallery in LA deals with activist athletes such as Billie Jean King, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, who famously gave the Black Power salute at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. What's he showing in Sidelined?**

He has a neon text piece that reads "Currency Means Nothing If You Still Ain't Free," and another neon work that has logos for the Washington Redskins and the Carolina Panthers, which illustrates a black panther. That adds a whole other layer to the show, when you think of sidelined groups.

**Glenn Kaino, who made a massive sculptural installation reproducing Tommie Smith's raised arm in 2013, is showing some of his Spontaneous Combustion works, which use American flags. What are they about?**

Glenn starts with a pure white recreation of an American flag then tie-dye soaks it with a Civil War-era tarring solution that's combustible. When it explodes, it makes a target-like shape with concentric circles. From his point of view, the work raises the question of what's to blame when you see someone burning a flag or taking a knee. When they're exhibited, he lights them so that you see the shadow of the flag, where the stars and stripes are quite prominent. It's very poetic.

**What's the crux of the show?**

The crux is to create a space for conversation—to deal with the elephant in the room.

**What do you think of Trump's approach to the protest phenomenon?**

I'm not surprised by it. He's always been the same way. It's bad, but it's not entirely bad because without a situation like this we'd be less likely to deal with the issues. We had a period during which some people felt that racism had gone away. Trump encourages people that have a similar mindset to him; they're coming out of the woodwork and feel they have the freedom to say and do whatever they want. I try to find the good even in the ugly.

**Can art really make a difference to social issues?**

I think art can make a difference. Like anything else it can sow the seeds.

**What do you hope the audience's takeaway will be?**

I hope that they're inspired and that it's a way to encourage accountability—not just in the context of art, but also in our day-to-day lives.

**And what about for you?**

I have faith that something good will come of it and that the conversation will continue to grow beyond this exhibition.

*Sidelined is on view at Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, through February 17.*